

1997 E.H. JOHNSON AWARD

**THE REV. DR. JOHN FIFE, PC (USA)
Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario**

I am truly grateful for the opportunity to be with you today, but to receive this award as an individual honour would not only be dishonest, it would be downright sinful. The truth is that I agreed to accept your gracious invitation to be present at this luncheon in honour of E.H. Johnson because for years I have been searching for an appropriate way to say “thank you” to the churches and people of Canada. During the 1980’s, while the governments of the United States and Mexico were systematically violating human rights and refugee law, the people of Canada were a shining beacon of hope and respect for international law and refugee rights. Without the possibility of asylum in Canada, many of the most at-risk refugees trying to survive the perilous journey from war-torn Central America would have surely perished. Without the outreach program of the Canadian government to refugees imprisoned and facing deportation from the United States, many more refugees would have been deported to the torture chambers and death squads of El Salvador and Guatemala. Without the hospitality and compassion of the churches and people of Canada, many thousands of refugees would never have found safety and freedom from fear and oppression. Only God knows how many lives were saved as a result, but I do know that I speak for countless refugees, sanctuary congregations, human rights advocates, and people of goodwill when I say to the people of Canada and this faith community – “Thank you and God bless you”.

I also must be truthful about accepting this award in honour of Dr. E.H. Johnson. In reviewing the past recipients, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Dr. C.M. Kao, and all of the other honorees, I must tell you that I feel I do not belong in that distinguished company. Perhaps I can explain best by telling you the story of my return to seminary in the midst of the sanctuary movement.

I was asked to speak to a chapel service before faculty and students. The President introduced me in this way. “We have had many distinguished graduates of this seminary.” He went on to name theologians, church leaders and cathedral church pastors. “Our guest this morning”, he said, “is not one of the distinguished graduates of this seminary. Our guest is one of the notorious ones. You will know what I mean when you hear him.”

The truth is that, in the beginning of the sanctuary movement, we searched desperately for some prophetic individual like Archbishop Tutu, or Dr. King, or Dr. Kao, or Archbishop Romero, or Dr. Helen Caldicott – and could find no such individual. And so the sanctuary movement in the United States in the 1980’s became based in enduring faith communities and their own local leadership. In truth, it is my honour today to accept the Dr. E.H. Johnson Award on behalf of all of the congregations throughout Mexico and North America who provided sanctuary to the refugees from Central America. I know that you understand that you honour all those Protestant, Catholic and Jewish communities of faith with this award.

But the award is for being “on the cutting edge of mission” and the sanctuary movement of the 1980’s for refugees from Central America is now ancient history. In fact, four years ago I sensed that our congregation was too satisfied with their accomplishment in sanctuary and that we were not searching for new signs of the Holy Spirit on the cutting edge. So we held a special worship celebration followed by a fiesta and dance, and declared the sanctuary movement over. We had succeeded beyond our expectations. Temporary protected status had been extended to all Salvadorans and Guatemalans in the United States; they were granted work permits to support their families; the asylum process was reformed; and the infiltration of churches by undercover government agents had been declared unconstitutional. It was a time to celebrate, dance, and then move on.

Recent events have changed those plans. Politicians have been appealing to the racism and xenophobia and that has always been present in American culture. Seeking scapegoats for our problems in education,

health care, public safety, and the growing gulf between the rich and poor, they have perpetrated the blame on immigrants. During our most recent election process, regressive and punitive immigration legislation was passed that rolled back all of the reforms that had been accomplished by the sanctuary movement. Steel walls are being erected along the border with Mexico, the number of Border Patrol agents has quadrupled, military units are patrolling the fence, systematic violations of human rights are common, and refugees can now be expelled at the border without any possibility of appeal.

This phenomenon of political xenophobia is not confined to the United States, but is common throughout the North Atlantic nations. Britain today has been described as a nation of Muslim-haters. A report by Runnymede Trust, an independent think tank on race relations, declares that hatred of Islam and Muslims has become “more explicit, more extreme, and more dangerous.”

In Britain, as in France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden, racist gangs, often linked to far-right groups, are identified as responsible for continuing atrocities against immigrants, including murder.

The Guardian, an influential daily newspaper in London, recently stated that immigration is the single most important issue used by parties of the far right throughout Europe, adding that some measures of immigration control can bear a strong resemblance to those applied against Jews in Nazi Germany.

In Germany, citizenship laws are based on “blood-lines” and German ancestry, and the government insists that even children of legal immigrants obtain residence permits and visas.

France has a xenophobic National Front Party that is gaining adherents by the thousands, a situation that not long ago prompted the daily newspaper LeMonde to suggest that the air is harder and harder to breathe in today’s France.

As I understand, even Canada, that shining beacon of hope and respect for international law, has become tarnished by that same political expediency. I am grateful for the Call to Conscience statement on refugees from faith communities of Canada (June 1995) which declared:

“We believe that most of our people will be shocked and motivated by information regarding the distress of refugees in Canada”.

The need for the church as sanctuary for refugees is apparent throughout North America and Europe once again. The call is being answered from Romero House in Toronto, to the Church of Scotland, to churches in Germany, Switzerland, France and Great Britain. Consultations are being held within the sanctuary congregations in the United States and Mexico. The conclusion, the bottom line for all of us is the phrase repeated in the Canadian Call to Conscience – NEVER AGAIN.

In the midst of our trial in federal court in Arizona, I received a letter from a rabbi along with a generous cheque. “This donation to your defense fund is in memory of,” - and he listed 14 names. “They are all my relatives who died in the holocaust. Through our resistance to evil, together, may it never happen again.”

Refugees and displaced people are the most vulnerable on the face of the earth. Often without documents, fleeing across borders, starving, terrified, even tortured – they search for a place of safety and refuge. The sanctuary church provides not only refuge, but a protective community. Sanctuary is emerging as the identifying practice of a fully ecumenical and international community of faith-formed peoples that assume responsibility for the non-violent protection of human rights. Individuals can resist injustice, but only in community can we do justice.

And as a public witness, the sanctuary church adds prophetic witness to a protective community; that is, in addition to protecting the violated from the state, the public practice of sanctuary holds the state accountable for its violations of human rights. As more and more countries adopt policies to prevent the admission of refugees, prophetic witness may risk aiding the victims to cross borders safely, or to save them from deportation. Let us be absolutely clear about our legal as well as our moral responsibility. There is no such thing as an illegal refugee. It is never a crime to protect a refugee. Never!

The Nuremburg Principles established the duty of each individual and every institution to defend victims of human rights violations – even when one’s own government is the violator. The sanctuary movement is grounded on this legal principle. What is missing is a global institutional base for actualizing in community practice the responsibilities of Nuremburg. The only way the international community currently has of enforcing Human Rights and International Law upon a violator state is war.

If a peaceful way of holding violator states accountable is to be developed internationally, then the practice of sanctuary may be pointing toward that peaceable way. In order to provide a global social base for the defense of human rights, an institution should have the following characteristics.

The institution must be transnational. Refugees are scattered across the face of the earth. Any institution which undertakes their defense must embody a widespread global presence.

The institution must be broadly community-based as well. Refugees do not usually flee to centers of economic or political power where international agencies have offices, but are at greatest risk along borders in often isolated areas of the world.

The institution must be based on values which transcend national self-interest and national security. Since World War II, we have seen too many lives lost to the politicizing of refugee policy by nations and the use of refugee policy as another propaganda tool.

The institution must have an historic commitment to refugees and the defense of human rights. Unless we choose to start from the beginning and create a new global institution with these capabilities, we should look for an already existing base which could consciously accept that responsibility.

The point by now is obvious. Such an institution does exist – the Church.

All that remains is the clear acceptance of that international role by the Church – and beyond the Christian Church by the great religious faith communities. Sanctuary only points the way to the fulfillment of our most ancient traditions. The Torah, the Prophets, and the Gospel all proclaim our responsibility to sojourners, strangers and refugees. God is calling us now to incarnate that vision of the Kingdom into the spirituality, policy and practice of the Church.

The human rights worker and poet, Carolyn Forché, writes it this way.

“In the mass graves, a woman’s hand caged in the ribs
of her child...in Germany, the silent windy fields, in the
Soviet Union where the snow is scarred with wire, in
Salvador where the blood will never soak into the ground –
everywhere and always go after that which is lost. There
is a cyclone fence between ourselves and the slaughter,
and behind it we hover in a calm protected world like netted fish,
exactly like netted fish. It is either the beginning or the end
of the world, and the choice is ourselves or nothing.”